



Simon Chuckster grilled in 'Sweet.'

MOVIES

Sour Sweetback

By Joseph Gelmis

Melvin Van Peebles has a built-in defense for his new film, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song." It is a militant black movie that is being judged by a lily white critical establishment. If the critical response is negative, he can claim that whitey is biased or ignorant of the black experience.

His defense is better than his film. White reaction has ranged so far, from nervousness to antagonism. Some whites are obviously threatened by Van Peebles' message of black retaliation for centuries of suppression. His (anti) hero, Sweet Sweetback, is a stereotype stud. It is all he is suited for, having been raised in a brothel (Van Peebles' young son plays Sweetback as a child in a scene where he is seduced by a prostitute) and having as a job to perform sex acts in public before audiences of tourists. His rebellion is meant to be the worm turning, the glimmer of consciousness in the least militant of blacks. The film ends with a warning. The victorious murderous Sweetback is going to be returning from exile in Mexico soon, honkies, so watch out, you're not going to be safe anymore.

Unfortunately for those of us who might have responded to a good movie positively, whatever its origins and purpose, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" is a superficial melodrama that depends almost entirely for its effect on anger, raw vitality and racist clichés.

The shock value of the film is similar to that of "Joe," which also used a racial stereotype to vent frustration and rage. A primitive character who speaks very little, Sweetback beats two corrupt cops senseless, kills another two white cops who ambush him, and destroys some dogs unleashed to hunt and kill him. He becomes, in effect a black superman.

As an emotional catharsis, the film is a useful emetic for black Americans who have traditionally been humiliated by the white power structure. But it is important to see "Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss Song" in historical perspective. It is blatant agitprop, a surreal comic strip rather than a human drama. The film is an exercise in raising consciousness, egoboosting and vacarious revenge on *The Man*. In the evolution of black cinema produced outside the system, it is significant because it does not tell it the way the white power brokers would prefer to hear it.

Yet, though it is an important film, it is not a particularly good one. Van Peebles has made several serious mistakes. He completely overshadows the young radical. The crucial mistake is that of playing Sweetback himself. The crux of this film is that this amoral creature from the lower depths becomes radicalized. And, in the key scene, he gives up his own means of escape from a police trap so that a wounded young black revolutionary

can get away. He says pretentiously that the young man is the future.

Van Peebles has shown us nothing in the behavior or conversation of this bland young man to justify this sudden transformation of Sweetback's struggle for self-survival, which has been the single motivating force in his entire life. The only character who has any impact in this film is Sweetback, which may be because the energetic and passionate director and writer is also playing the role.

In "Watermelon Man," Van Peebles had Godfrey Cambridge in white face as a bigot turned black overnight who, after learning what it means to be black in America, become a militant. His new film is addressed only to a black audience. Which is apparently why he feels free to mix realism with surreal caricature (e.g. in the case of a white police chief in a white motorcycle gang whose leader is an Amazon). He exploits and parodies every racial cliché gleefully. He is making a funky, non-white movie.

So he has Sweetback constantly climbing nude over his women without the hypocritical lyricism and glamor and eroticism of white movies, and he even has a scene where a black criminal sits on a toilet wrapped only in a towel while he talks. Van Peebles is a talented director who has chosen to provide an outlet for black rage. He is right to take the position that the mere existence of a Watts is a dark obscenity beyond his power to duplicate with any cinematic violence. But his solution is to light a fuse rather than a candle. /II